

Helping People Establish Healthy Eating Habits

by Dorothy Mullen

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF DIET for our children with ADHD? Scientific studies indicate that only a very small percentage of children have ADHD that is associated with clinically evident food sensitivities. For these children an elimination diet may help identify the problem foods. But many children with ADHD have difficulty eating healthy diets, a key to having a happy and healthy life.

If the child lives in a pure environment, eats only whole food, without exposure to antibiotics, plastics, or food additives, food is probably not a problem. If a child gravitates to fresh vegetables and fruits, legumes, meat, fish, and fowl, chances are good that food is not an issue. You are fortunate indeed if he turns up his nose at candy, baked goods, and pizza. But this is not the case for most of our children who have ADHD.

The hallmark of the child who does not have a healthy diet is that he has a special relationship with some foods. Ask yourself these questions:

- › Does your child happily eat vegetables or do you bargain with him to get him to eat them?
- › Does he lobby you for junk food?
- › Does giving him his favorite processed foods and beverages solve his problem—

stop the whining, calm him down, wake him up, or otherwise alter his mood or energy level?

- › Does he come from a biological family with any of these problems: anxiety, depression, learning issues, obesity, diabetes, or problems with alcohol?

Three main forces drive a child's dependence on processed food and drink:

- › Greater fluctuations in blood sugar and the attendant mood chemistry compared to whole foods. The child will seek foods that raise blood sugar (sweets and starches).
- › Addiction-like relationships with specific items (think about chocolate or the bread basket), which overlaps with sensitivities.
- › Sensitivities—some use the word “allergies”—to specific constituents of foods. The reactions can be behavioral and attentional.

Swings in blood sugar are the easiest to ferret out because the symptoms are so clear. Rises and crashes in blood sugar brought on by eating processed foods and not getting enough exercise come with signature brain effects. When the brain is out of fuel because insulin responses to junk food have driven sugar too low for normal brain function,

we can expect to see poor concentration, flagging mental energy, mood swings, anxiousness, poor impulse control, and strong urges to consume things that will medicate away the discomfort of low blood sugar by raising it fast.

Similar effects can be seen in a child when he has an affinity with the constituents of particular foods. Using addiction language to describe it, the child goes through withdrawal from a food or drug (cranky, craving, lobbying for processed food) and experiences relief when he gets a “hit.” The most likely culprits include sugars, flour products, milk products, artificial sweeteners, caffeine, and chocolate.

Some foods are more like drugs than other foods (compare Twizzlers with Brussels sprouts). Some bodies are more vulnerable to forming addictive relationships than other bodies. Persistent, frequent demands for just about anything are a clear sign that food sensitivity should be investigated. Consider eliminating foods that seem to be associated with these demands or with certain moods or behaviors and see if it makes a difference. This is harder for the food-sleuthing parent to track and may require lab work. But you can sort out the blood sugar challenges at home, for free.

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What can you do to improve your family's eating habits?

In New Jersey, we're creating a network of support groups—the Suppers Programs—to help people establish healthy habits (learn more at TheSuppersPrograms.org). Self-doubt, rebelling children, and spousal sabotage are to be expected. After all, the opportunity we're offering them is to give up their favorite foods! But the payoff is enormous because the same foods that help the kids help the adults with their health challenges.

Here are some tips and strategies our families have used to successfully transition their families to healthy eating habits.

- **Model the eating behavior you want from your children.**

This can never be overemphasized. Your children watch what you do, and if you don't eat a healthy diet, they won't.

- **Make breakfast.**

Start eating the right breakfast, usually one that combines protein, complex carbohydrates, and some high-quality fat and no sweetened or artificially sweetened items.

- **Teach the difference between a snack and dessert.**

Snacks are the same foods you would eat at a meal and have nutritional value: leftovers, fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds. Desserts are everything else, and should only be eaten on a belly full of real food (high-fiber vegetables and fruits, good fats, and lean protein). You don't have to vilify chips, candy, cookies, bagels, soft drinks, and other junk; they just have to start looking like dessert instead of a snack

- **Replace favorite foods with healthier versions.**

Start with small changes like replacing big-name junk food items containing hydrogenated fats and high fructose corn syrup with healthier varieties. Brave the objections and realize that as favorite junk foods are less available, healthier versions of junk food gain acceptance. Nutritional harm reduction facilitates the transition to healthy foods.

- **Observe reactions.**

Observe how children react/respond to certain foods and drinks. Take charge of food elimination and challenge experiments if a dietary culprit is suspected.

- **Introduce water as a beverage option.**

Keep a fresh pitcher in the fridge and put it on the table at snacks and meals. At the same time, reduce purchases of sugared or artificially sweetened soft drinks.

- **Beat them to it.**

Have fresh fruit, cut-up veggies, nuts, seeds, hummus, cheese, and leftovers ready when they are hungry. Let the salad or a plate of fruits and veggies be the first thing on the table while you prepare the rest of the meal.

- **Buy mostly food that has no label.**

The food that will turn your health around doesn't need a label because it contains only one, readily obvious thing: one chicken, two apples, three yams, and so forth. In general, the whole food is in the periphery of the store, and the junk is in the aisles. Avoid aisles.



- **Exercise control at the grocery store and you won't have to at home.**

The most important time to exercise control is before junk comes into the house. If you buy it and try to control it at home, it's a lot harder—especially if you aren't home to monitor controversial items. Bring into the house only the healthy foods you want the family to eat.

- **Take them out for the treats.**

Let a trip to the ice cream store or bakery be a real treat because it doesn't take place every day. If something takes place every day, it's not a treat; it's the expected norm.

- **Learn to distinguish between a "treat" and a "trigger."**

If eating a special food does not lead to unwanted eating or behavior, it's a treat. If eating a special food leads to the unwanted desire to eat more, to whining, or to altered mood and behavior, it was a trigger. Generally assume that trigger foods need to be eliminated at least for a while and treats may be enjoyed in moderation.

- **Talk to them and include them.**

Let spouses, friends, and children know how important it is to make these changes and why. Avoid hovering, micromanaging, prodding, or bargaining. None of these is necessary if you have only healthy food in the house. Include the family in as many steps as possible: eating together at a table, preparing the food, picking the food, even growing the food.

- **Expect sabotage and/or rebellion.**

These changes are not going to be greeted favorably by anyone who is stuck on junk food's hook. Resistance, hostility, rebellion, and spousal or friend sabotage are normal points on the trajectory of change.

A HEALTHY DIET CAN MAKE IT EASIER for your child to deal with some of the challenges of ADHD. Wouldn't it be a shame if food compromised the potential effects of your efforts to help him attend better? Making the changes needed to establish a healthy diet may require support and time, but it is possible. Palates are educable. Real food can become delicious even to the palate jaded from junk food, but it requires persistence. 🍌

Dorothy Mullen is the founder of *The Suppers Programs*, a network of free-to-users support groups in New Jersey for people who have a wide range of reasons for wanting to prepare real food together and eat it. She holds a master's degree in substance abuse and addictions counseling from the College of New Jersey. She also runs a garden-based education program at Riverside Elementary School in Princeton, where students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade develop a palate for fresh produce while learning in the organic instructional gardens. She is the editor of *Logical Miracles: 100 Stories of Hope and Healing* (Create Space, 2011).